Art out of Hell: Shalamov of Kolyma

John Glad

SHALAMOV'S *Kolyma Tales** are stories of the Soviet forced labour camps located in the Kolyma region of north-eastern Siberia. Robert Conquest, in his study of the area,[1] estimates that three million people met their deaths there. As an absolute minimum, he sets the figure at between two and two and a half million. His estimates are based on ships' records, accounts of first-hand witnesses and other reliable, although necessarily incomplete sources. It might seem incredible that the closest estimate the western scholar can produce is "give or take a million," but one must remember that historians have no direct access to the records, that there has been no Nuremberg Trial complete with captured archives, witnesses, etc. In his powerful story, "Lend-Lease," Shalamov writes of having learned of an enormous mass grave:

> With my exhausted, tormented mind I tried to understand: how did there come to be such an enormous grave in this area? . . . I realized that I knew only a small bit of that world, a pitifully small part, that twenty kilometres away there might be a shack for geological explorers looking for uranium or a gold mine with thirty thousand prisoners. Much can be hidden in the folds of the mountain.
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> And then I remembered the greedy blaze of the fireweed, the furious blossoming of the taiga in summer when it tried to conceal in the grass and foliage any deed of man—good or bad. And if I forget, the grass will forget . . .

Varlam Shalamov, a man with an enormous literary talent and an incredibly tragic life, has not forgotten. His stories and sketches provide no statistical data about the fates of the millions murdered in Kolyma. Rather, they are a vivid account of individual moments in the lives of individual men, for only in the particular can we begin to comprehend the horror of the whole. Even so, it is impossible to appreciate the enormity of this tragedy. It is the proper duty of the historians to discuss events in quantitative terms. Were there two and a half or were there three million victims? Emotionally, however, we can never come to grips with a statistic of that sort any more than we can appreciate that one star is a hundred million light years from us, and another a hundred and fifty million.

* The two stories published below are from a collection of Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* edited and translated by John Glad. The book is to be published soon by W. W. Norton & Company Inc., New York, whose cooperation we gratefully acknowledge.

[1] *Kolyma: The Arctic Death Camps* (Macmillan London Ltd., and Viking, New York, 1978).

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By his own admission, Solzhenitsyn barely touches upon the Kolyma region in *The Gulag Archipelago.* He writes that when he first came upon an anthology of Shalamov's poetry, he "trembled as if he were meeting a brother." He asked Shalamov to write *The Gulag Archipelago* with him, but Shalamov—already an old, sick man—declined. Nevertheless, Solzhenitsyn writes: "Shalamov's experience in the camps was longer and more bitter than my own, and I respectfully confess that to him and not me was it given to touch those depths of bestiality and despair toward which life in the camps dragged us all."

KOLYMA is an enormous area, with the coldest temperatures in the northern hemisphere. The area is so desolate and isolated that in 1927 there were only 7,580 inhabitants in an area five or six times the size of France! In 1932–33 foundations were laid for a massive forced labour area intended to produce gold for the young Soviet state.

The years 1937–39 were the years of the purges. Millions of people were arrested, held for months in appalling prison conditions, tried under ridiculous charges and either executed or sent in cattle cars to Siberia. Emaciated from hopelessly inadequate diets, denied even sufficient drinking water and toilet facilities, freezing from the cold, they would arrive at the Siberian ports of Vladivostock, Vanino, Nakhodka after a trip that lasted between 30 and 40 days! There they were held in concentration camps for varying periods of time and sent by ship to Kolyma. A prisoner in the camps described the experience:

> When we came out on to the immense field outside the camp I witnessed a spectacle that would have done justice to a Cecil B. DeMille production. As far as the eye could see there were columns of prisoners marching in one direction or another like armies on a battlefield. A huge detachment of security officers, soldiers and signal corpsmen with field telephones and motor-cycles kept in touch with headquarters, arranging the smooth flow of these human rivers. I asked what this giant operation was meant to be. The reply was that each time a transport was sent off, the administration reshuffled the occupants of every cage in camp so that everyone had to be removed with his bundle of rags on his shoulder to the big field and from there directed to his new destination. Only 5,000 were supposed to leave, but 100,000 were part of the scene before us. One could see endless columns of women, of cripples, of old men and even teenagers, all in military formation five in a row, going through the huge field, and directed by whistles or flags.

Conditions on the ships were appalling. The following is a description of the hold of a women's ship:

> We climbed down a very steep, slippery wooden stairway with great difficulty and finally reached the bottom. It took us some time to accustom our eyes to the dim light of the dingy lower deck.
>
> As I began to see where we were, my eyes beheld a scene which neither Goya nor Gustav Doré could ever have imagined. In that

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> immense, cavernous, murky hold were crammed more than 2,000 women. From the floor to the ceiling as in a gigantic poultry farm, they were cooped up in open cages, five of them in each nine-foot-square space. The floor was covered with more women. Because of the heat and humidity most of them were only scantily dressed; some had even stripped down to nothing. The lack of washing facilities and the relentless heat had covered their bodies with ugly red spots, boils, and blisters. The majority were suffering from some form of skin disease or other, apart from stomach ailments and dysentery.
>
> At the bottom of the stairway we had just climbed down stood a giant cask, on the edges of which, in full view of the soldiers standing on guard above, women were perched like birds, and in the most incredible positions. There was no shame, no prudery, as they crouched to urinate or to empty their bowels. One had the impression that they were some half-human, half-bird creatures which belonged to a different world and a different age. Yet seeing a man coming down the stairs, although a mere prisoner like themselves, many of them began to smile and some even tried to comb their hair. Who were these women? And where had they come from? I asked myself. I soon learned that they had been arrested all over Russia and those countries of Europe overrun by Soviet armies. The main accusation against them was collaboration with the enemy.

Although there was some lead-mining, fur-trapping and a fishing industry in Kolyma, the chief occupation of the prisoners was goldmining. At least at first. But after a time gold production was practically subordinated to the task of extermination. Because of the geography of the region—its isolation and the mountains cutting off the only path out by land—there was no real opportunity for escape. It was no secret, therefore, that people were brought there to die, having first produced some gold. The world described in these stories leaves little room for any other conclusion.

The attitude of the West toward this state of affairs has been truly amazing. Ships such as the one used to transport women prisoners, described above, were purchased from England, Holland and Sweden. In the summer of 1944 Professor Owen Lattimore, representing the Office of War Information, and Henry Wallace, Vice-President of the United States, visited Kolyma and wrote glowing accounts of it. Lattimore said the Soviet effort "could roughly be compared to a combination of the Hudson Bay Co. and T.V.A."

SHALAMOV'S stories are in the Chekhovian tradition: a brief plot (less compact at times than Chekhov's) devoted to one incident, the narration of which is objective and impartial, avoiding any obvious show of sympathy with the victim and thereby heightening the horror of the situation; the point of the story is reserved for the end.

However, the affinities with Chekhov's work are not confined to

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structure. Take Savelov's monologue which could have been taken from a Chekhovian play:

> Just imagine . . . We'll survive, leave for the mainland and quickly become sick old men. We'll have heart pains and rheumatism, and all the sleepless nights, the hunger and long hard work of your youth will leave their mark on us even if we remain alive. We'll be sick without knowing why, groan and drag ourselves from one dispensary to another. This unbearable work will leave us with wounds that can't be healed, and all our later years will lead to lives of physical and psychological pain. And that pain will be endless and assume many different forms. But even among those terrible future days there will be good ones when we'll be almost healthy and we won't think about our sufferings. And the number of those days will be exactly equal to the number of days each of us has been able to loaf in camp.

The figure of the narrator is an unusually passive one. He is always the victim of the action, and almost never initiates any of his own. Rarely does he even speak. His hopes and plans extend no further than a few hours; to getting warm, to receiving an extra piece of bread. He is capable of admiring men of action. The figure of Major Pugachov who leads an escape attempt is lionized, but this path of action remains a fantasy for the author himself. Even so, Pugachov ends his life by committing suicide.

Just as in the camps of Nazi Germany, when resistance was impossible or of no avail, people kept the option of suicide as the last card they could play. Shalamov writes:

> I believed a person could consider himself a human being as long as he felt totally prepared to kill himself, to interfere in his own biography. It was this awareness that provided the will to live.
>
> I checked myself—frequently—and felt I had the strength to die, and thus remained alive.
>
> Much later I realized that I had simply built myself a harbour, avoided the question, for at the critical moment I would not be the same man as I am now when the question of life or death would be an exercise of the will. I would inevitably weaken, become a traitor, betray myself. Instead of thinking of death, I simply felt that my former decision needed some other answer, and my promises to myself, the oaths of youth were naive and very artificial.

SHALAMOV'S biography is largely contained in his stories. He was born in 1907 and first began to publish in 1932. In 1937 he was arrested in one of the great "purges" for the crime of having declared the Nobel Prize laureate, Ivan Bunin, to be a classic writer of Russian literature. He writes that he spent nearly 17 years in the camps, which means that he must have been released sometime in 1954.

At present, only Shalamov's poetry can be published in the USSR; reviewers are forced to write nonsense such as: "He (Shalamov) writes

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primarily about nature. One gets the impression that his surroundings interest him only on an impressionistic level." Occasionally, however, the careful reader can read between the lines. In one review of Shalamov's work the well-known Soviet writer, Boris Slutsky, quotes a conversation Slutsky once had with the poet, Zabolotsky. Zabolotsky pointed to a house under construction and mentioned that he himself had been a labourer, a mason, a carpenter and a building foreman in his day. The remark, so seemingly irrelevant to a review of a collection of verse, immediately tips off the reader as to Shalamov's fate. Zabolotsky was himself a prisoner in the camps—a fact well known to educated Russians. Thus, the Soviet reader can realize that Shalamov is one of those who survived the camps. In time it became evident to the authorities that Shalamov's prose writings could not be ignored. Even disregarding their artistic merit, they are of major documentary significance. "The Used-Book Dealer," for example, reveals that the State was already experimenting with the misuse of psychiatry and chemical will suppressants at the time of the infamous Zinoviev, Piatakov and Bukharin show trials in 1937–38.

Shalamov's stories were first circulated in manuscript within the USSR and later published in Russian in the émigré journals, *The New Review* and *Grani*. A complete Russian language edition of his work has been published in London.[2] In France three different editions of his work have appeared and editions are being prepared for publication in other languages. All appear with more or less the same publisher's note: "The following stories appear without the knowledge or consent of the author and he should not be held responsible for their publication."

The Soviet government was placed in an embarrassing situation: Shalamov could have been prosecuted and his writings branded with the usual pat formula—"slander of Soviet reality." That, however, would have drawn attention to his case. Western newspapers are largely interested in writers who have already attracted the attention of the public, and the Soviet government by re-attacking its own victims was often acting as press agent for attacked authors. If one examines the cases of the so-called "dissident" authors, one is struck by the fact that many of them are really apolitical and owe their press coverage to government persecution. Pasternak, Akhmatova, Zoshchenko, and Brodsky might serve as examples. In the case of Shalamov it was evident that his stories were a major document of our time and any attempt to discredit them was doomed to failure.

The chroniclers of our times, the Shalamovs and Solzhenitsyns, have drawn a picture of mass terror, in which not only the active opposition to the regime was liquidated, but its potential opponents (and their families, friends and other innocents) were also murdered. Not only were

[2] Varlam Shalamov, *Kolymskie Rasskazy* (Overseas Publications Interchange Ltd., London, 1978).

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executioners executed, but the same fate befell their executioners. Such was the glue of terror that held this enormous structure together.

It is against this background that men like Shalamov testify to a scandal of cruelty and genocide that makes all western sins pitifully insignificant. And the greater their talent, the greater the danger they represent. The " cult of personality " has indeed been renounced—but in a very guarded fashion. As for embarrassing witnesses, a number of solutions have been tried out, ranging from reimprisonment to exile. This approach, however, has often simply provided an additional embarrassment in that the regime appears once more to be espousing Stalinism. Shalamov's case is unusual in that he was forced merely to sign a short statement to the effect that " the thematics of his work were no longer topical " and the authorities now hold their breath, hoping his work will pass unnoticed in the flood of testimony from other victims. This more subtle approach has proved to be an effective tactic in dealing with a sensation-oriented western press, but Shalamov is too major a writer to hide under this bushel. Shalamov's time has come.

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Lend-Lease

Varlam Shalamov

THE fresh tractor prints in the marsh were tracks of some prehistoric beast that bore little resemblance to an article of American technology delivered under the terms of Lend-Lease.

We convicts had heard of these gifts from beyond the sea and the emotional confusion they had introduced into the minds of the camp bigwigs. Worn knit suits and secondhand pullovers collected for the convicts of Kolyma were snapped up in near fistfights by the wives of the Magadan generals.

As for the magical jars of sausage sent by Lend-Lease, we saw them only at a distance. What we knew and knew well were the chubby tins of Spam. Counted, measured by a very complex table of replacement, stolen by the greedy hands of the camp authorities, counted again and measured a second time before introduction to the kettle, boiled there till transformed into mysterious fibres that smelled like anything in the world except meat—this Spam excited the eye, but not the taste buds. Once tossed in the pot, Spam from Lend-Lease had no taste at all. Convict stomachs preferred something domestic such as old, rotten venison that couldn't be boiled down even in seven camp kettles. Venison doesn't disappear, doesn't become ephemeral like Spam.

Oatmeal from Lend-Lease we relished, but we never got more than two tablespoons per portion.

But the fruits of technology also came from Lend-Lease—fruits that could not be eaten: clumsy tomahawk-like hatchets, handy shovels with un-Russian work-saving handles. The shovel blades were instantaneously affixed to long Russian handles and flattened to make them more capacious.

Barrels of glycerin! Glycerin! The guard dipped out a bucketful with a kitchen pot on the very first night and got rich selling it to the convicts as "American honey."

From Lend-Lease also came enormous black fifty-ton Diamond trucks with trailors and iron sides and five-ton Studebakers that could easily manage any hill. There were no better trucks in all of Kolyma. Day and night Studebakers and Diamonds hauled American wheat along the thousand-mile road. The wheat was in pretty white linen sacks stamped with the American Eagle, and chubby, tasteless bread "rations" were baked from this flour. Bread from Lend-Lease flour possessed an amazing quality: anyone who ate it stopped visiting the toilet; once in five days a bowel movement would be produced that wasn't even worth the name. The stomach and intestines of the convict absorbed without remainder this magnificent white bread with its mixture of corn, bonemeal and something else in addition—perhaps hope. And the time has not yet come to count the lives saved by this wheat from beyond the sea.

The Studebakers and Diamonds ate a lot of gas, but the gas also came from Lend-Lease, a light aviation gas. Russian trucks were adapted

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to be heated with wood: two stoves set near the motor were heated with split logs. There arose several Wood Supply Centres headed by Party members working on contract. Technical leadership at these Wood Supply Centres was provided by a chief engineer, a plain engineer, a rate-setter, a planner and bookkeepers. I don't remember whether two or three labourers ran the circular saw at the Wood Processing Plant. There may have been as many as three. The equipment was from Lend-Lease, and when a tractor came to the camp, a new word appeared in our language: "bulldozer."

The prehistoric beast was freed from its chain: an American bulldozer with caterpillar tracks and a wide blade. The vertical metal shield gleamed like a mirror reflecting the sky, the trees, the stars and the dirty faces of the convicts. Even the guard walked up to the foreign monster and said a man could shave himself before such a mirror. But there was no shaving for us; even the thought couldn't have entered our heads.

The sighs and groans of the new American beast could be heard for a long time in the frosty air. The bulldozer coughed angrily in the frost, puffed and then suddenly roared and moved boldly forward, crushing the shrubbery and passing easily over the stumps; this then was the help from beyond the sea.

Everywhere on the slope of the mountain were scattered construction-quality logs and firewood. Now we would not have the unbearable task of hauling and stacking the iron logs of Daurian larch by hand. To drag the logs over the shrubbery, down the narrow paths of the mountain slope, was an impossible job. Before 1938 they used to send horses for the job but horses could not tolerate the North as well as people, were weaker than people, died under the strain of the hauling. Now the vertical knife of the foreign bulldozer had come to help us (us?).

None of us ever imagined that we would be given some light work instead of the unendurable log hauling that was hated by all. They would simply increase our norms and we would be forced to do something else—just as degrading and contemptible as any camp labour. Our frost-bitten toes and fingers would not be cured by the American bulldozer. But there was the American machine grease! Ah yes, the machine grease! The barrel was immediately attacked by a crowd of starving men who knocked out the bottom right on the spot with a stone.

In their hunger, they claimed the machine grease was butter sent by Lend-Lease and there remained less than half a barrel by the time a sentry was sent to guard it, and the camp administration drove off the crowd of starving, exhausted men with rifle shots. The fortunate ones gulped down this Lend-Lease butter, not believing it was simply machine grease. After all, the healing American bread was also tasteless and also had that same metallic flavour. And everyone who had been lucky enough to touch the grease licked his fingers hours later, gulping down the minutest amounts of the foreign joy that tasted like young stone. After all, a stone is not born a stone, but a soft oily creature. A creature, and not a thing. A stone becomes a thing in old age. Young wet limestone tuffs in the mountains enchanted the eyes of escaped convicts and workers from the geological surveys. A man had to exert his will to tear himself away from these honeyed shores, these milky rivers of

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flowing young stone. But that was a mountain, a valley, stone; and this was a delivery from Lend-Lease, the creation of human hands. . . .

Nothing terrible happened to those who had dipped their hands into the barrel. Trained in Kolyma, stomach and bowels proved themselves capable of coping with machine grease. A sentry was placed to guard the remainder, for this was food for machines—creatures infinitely more important to the State than people.

And thus from beyond the ocean there had arrived one of those creatures as a symbol of victory, friendship and something else.

Three hundred men felt boundless envy toward the prisoner sitting at the wheel of the American tractor—Grinka Lebedev. There were better tractor operators than Lebedev among the convicts, but they had all been convicted according to Article 58 of the Criminal Code (political prisoners). Grinka Lebedev was a common criminal, a parricide, to be precise. Each of the three hundred witnessed his earthly joy: to roar over to the logging area sitting at the wheel of a well-lubricated tractor.

The logging area kept moving back. Felling of the taller trees suitable for building materials takes place in Kolyma along the stream banks where deep ravines force the trees to reach upward from their wind-protected havens toward the sun. In windy spots, in bright light, on marshy mountain slopes stand dwarfs—broken, twisted, tormented from eternally turning after the sun, from their constant struggle for a piece of thawed ground. The trees on the mountain slopes don't look like trees, but like monsters fit for a sideshow. The felling of trees is similar to the mining of gold in those same streams in that it is just as rushed: the stream, the pan, the launder, the temporary barrack, the hurried predatory leap that leaves the stream and area without forest for three hundred years and without gold—forever.

Somewhere there exists the science of forestry, but what kind of forestry can there be in a three-hundred-year-old larch forest in Kolyma during the War when the response to Lend-Lease is a hurried plunge into gold fever, harnessed, to be sure, by the guard towers of the " zones."

Many tall trees and even prepared, sectioned firelogs were abandoned. Many thick-ended logs disappeared into the snow, falling to the ground as soon as they had been hoisted onto the sharp, brittle shoulders of the prisoners. Weak prisoner hands, tens of hands cannot lift onto a shoulder (there exists no such shoulder!) a two-metre log, drag its iron weight for tens of metres over shrubs, potholes and pits. Many logs had been abandoned because of the impossibility of the job, and the bulldozer was supposed to help us.

But for its first trip in the land of Kolyma, on Russian land, it had been assigned a totally different job.

We watched the chugging bulldozer turn to the left and begin to climb the terrace to where there was a projection of rock and where we had been taken to work hundreds of times along the old road that led past the camp cemetery.

I hadn't given any thought to why we were led to work for the last few weeks along a new road instead of the familiar path indented from the boot heels of the guards and the thick rubber galoshes of the prisoners. The new road was twice as long as the old one. Everywhere

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there were hills and dropoffs, and we exhausted ourselves just getting to the job. But no one asked why we were being taken by a new path.

That was the way it had to be; that was the order; and we crawled on all fours, grabbing at stones that ripped open the skin of the fingers till the blood ran.

Only now did I see and understand the reason for all of this, and I thank God that He gave me the time and strength to witness it.

The logging area was just ahead, the slope of the mountain had been laid bare, and the shallow snow had been blown away by the wind. The stumps had all been rooted out; a charge of ammonal was placed under the larger ones, and the stumps would fly into the air. Smaller stumps were uprooted with long bars. The smallest were simply pulled out by hand like the shrubs of dwarf cedar. . . .

The mountain had been laid bare and transformed into a gigantic stage for a camp mystery play.

A grave, a mass prisoner grave, a stone pit stuffed full with undecaying corpses of 1938 was sliding down the side of the hill, revealing the secret of Kolyma.

In Kolyma, bodies are not given over to earth, but to stone. Stone keeps secrets and reveals them. The permafrost keeps and reveals secrets. All of our loved ones who died in Kolyma, all those who were shot, beaten to death, sucked dry by starvation, can still be recognized even after tens of years. There were no gas furnaces in Kolyma. The corpses wait in stone, in the permafrost.

In 1938 entire work gangs dug such graves, constantly drilling, exploding, deepening the enormous gray, hard, cold stone pits. Digging graves in 1938 was easy work; there was no "assignment," no "norm" calculated to kill a man with a fourteen-hour working day. It was easier to dig graves than to stand in rubber galoshes over bare feet in the icy waters where they mined gold—the "basic unit of production," the "first of all metals."

These graves, enormous stone pits, were filled to the brim with corpses. The bodies had not decayed; they were just bare skeletons over which stretched dirty, scratched skin bitten all over by lice.

Stone, the North resisted with all their strength this work of man, not accepting the corpses into their bowels. Defeated, humbled, retreating, stone promised to forget nothing, to wait and preserve its secret. The severe winters, the hot summers, the winds, the six years of rain had not wrenched the dead men from the stone. The earth opened, baring its subterranean storerooms, for they contained not only gold and lead, tungsten and uranium, but also undecaying human bodies.

These human bodies slid down the slope, perhaps attempting to arise. From a distance, from the other side of the creek, I had previously seen these moving objects that caught up against branches and stones; I had seen them through the few trees still left standing and I thought that they were logs that had not yet been hauled away.

Now the mountain was laid bare, and its secret was revealed. The grave "opened," and the dead men slid down the stony slope. Near the tractor road was dug an enormous new common grave. Who had dug it? No one was taken from the barrack for this work. It was enormous,

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and I and my companions knew that if we were to freeze and die, place would be found for us in this new grave, this housewarming for dead men.

The bulldozer scraped up the frozen bodies, thousands of bodies of thousands of skeleton-like corpses. Nothing had decayed: the twisted fingers, the pus-filled toes which were reduced to mere stumps after frostbite, the dry skin scratched bloody and eyes burning with a hungry gleam.

With my exhausted, tormented mind I tried to understand: how did there come to be such an enormous grave in this area? I am an old resident of Kolyma, and there hadn't been any gold mine here as far as I knew. But then I realized that I knew only a fragment of that world surrounded by a barbed wire zone and guard towers that reminded one of the pages of tent-like Moscow architecture. Moscow's taller buildings are guard towers keeping watch over the city's prisoners. That's what those buildings look like. And what served as models for Moscow architecture—the watchful towers of the Moscow Kremlin or the guard towers of the camps? The guard towers of the camp "zone" represent the main concept advanced by their time and brilliantly expressed in the symbolism of architecture.

I realized that I knew only a small bit of that world, a pitifully small part, that twenty kilometres away there might be a shack for geological explorers looking for uranium or a gold mine with thirty thousand prisoners. Much can be hidden in the folds of the mountain.

And then I remembered the greedy blaze of the fireweed, the furious blossoming of the taiga in summer when it tried to hide in the grass and foliage any deed of man—good or bad. And if I forget, the grass will forget. But the permafrost and stone will not forget.

Grinka Lebedev, parricide, was a good tractor driver, and he controlled the well-oiled foreign tractor with ease. Grinka Lebedev carefully carried out his job, scooping the corpses toward the grave with the gleaming bulldozer knife-shield, pushing them into the pit and returning to drag up more.

The camp administration had decided that the first job for the bulldozer received from Lend-Lease should not be work in the forest, but something far more important.

The work was finished. The bulldozer heaped a mound of stones and gravel on the new grave, and the corpses were hidden under stone. But they did not disappear.

The bulldozer approached us. Grinka Lebedev, common criminal and parricide, did not look at us, prisoners of Article 58. Grinka had been entrusted with a task by the government, and he had fulfilled that task. On the stone face of Grinka Lebedev were hewn pride and a sense of having accomplished his duty.

The bulldozer roared past us; on the mirror-like blade there was no scratch, not a single spot.

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The Used-Book Dealer

Varlam Shalamov

I WAS transferred from night into day—clearly a promotion, a confirmation, a success along the dangerous path to salvation of an orderly recruited from among the patients. I never noticed who took my place, for in those days I lacked the strength necessary for curiosity and I hoarded my movements—spiritual and physical. I'd accomplished resurrections before, and I knew how dearly one paid for unnecessary curiosity.

In a nocturnal half-sleep and out of the corner of my eye, however, I saw a pale dirty face grown over with reddish bristles, cavernous eyes, eyes whose colour I couldn't remember, and hooked frostbitten fingers clutching the handle of the smoky kettle. The barrack's hospital night was so dark and thick that the flame of the kerosene lantern, wavering and flickering as if in the wind, was not enough to light up the corridor, the ceiling, the wall, the door, the floor. The light ripped from the darkness only a piece of the entire night: a corner of the bedside table and the pale face bent over it. The new man on duty was dressed in the same gown that I used to wear. It was a dirty torn gown—an ordinary gown intended for the patients. During the day this filthy garment hung in the hospital ward and at night was donned over the quilt jacket of the orderly on duty who was always chosen from among the patients. The flannel was so extraordinarily thin it was transparent, but nevertheless it didn't tear. Perhaps the patients made no abrupt movements for fear that the gown would disintegrate. Or perhaps they were unable to.

The semicircle of light swayed back and forth, wavered, reached out in sudden movements. It seemed that the cold and not the wind swung the light above the night table of the orderly on duty. It was not the wind, but the cold itself that moved the light. Within the circle of light swung a face twisted with hunger, and hooked fingers searched the kettle's bottom for something no spoon could catch. Even frostbitten, the fingers were more reliable than a spoon; at once I understood the essence of the movement, the language of gesture.

There was no reason for me to know all this; I was only the day orderly.

But, a few days later, fate was unexpectedly prodded by a sudden and hurried departure in the back of a jolting truck. The vehicle crawled south toward Magadan along the bed of a nameless river that served as a winter road through the taiga. In the back of the truck two human beings were repeatedly tossed upward and dropped back onto the floor with a wooden thud as if they were logs. The guard was sitting in the cab, and I couldn't tell if I was being struck by a piece of wood or a man. At one of the feeding stops my neighbour's greedy champing struck me as familiar, and I recognized the hooked fingers and the pale dirty face.

We didn't speak to each other; each feared he might frighten off his happiness, his convict joy. The truck hurried on into the next day, and the road came to an end.

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We had both been selected by the camp to take paramedic courses. Magadan, the hospital and the courses were cloaked in fog, a white Kolyma fog. Were there markers, road markers? Would they accept political prisoners convicted under article 58 of the Criminal Code? Only those that came under point 10. And how about my neighbour in the rear of the truck? He too was ASA—Anti-Soviet Agitation. That was considered the same as point 10.

There was an examination on the Russian language. A dictation. The grades were posted the same day. I got an "A." After that came a written examination on mathematics, and I received another "A." It was taken for granted that future students were not required to know the fine points of the Soviet Constitution. . . . I lay on the bunk, dirty and still literally lousy. The job of orderly didn't destroy lice. But maybe it only seemed that way to me; lice infestation is one of the camp neuroses. I didn't have lice any more, but I still couldn't force myself to get used to the thought or, rather, to the feeling that the lice were gone. I had experienced that feeling two or three times. As for the "Constitution" or political economics, such things were no more intended for us than was the luxurious Astoria Hotel. In Butyrki Prison the guard on duty in our cell block shouted at me: "Why do you keep asking about the Constitution? Your Constitution is the Criminal Code!" And he was right. Yes, the Criminal Code was our Constitution. That was a long time ago. A thousand years. The fourth subject was chemistry. My grade was "C."

Oh, how those convict students strove for knowledge when the stakes of the game were life! How former professors of medicine strove to beat their life-saving knowledge into the heads of ignoramuses and idiots. From the storekeeper Silaikin down to the Tartar writer Min-Shabay, none of them had ever shown the slightest interest in medicine.

Twisting his thin lips in a sneer, the surgeon asked:

"Who invented penicillin?"

"Fleming!" The answer was given not by me, but by my neighbour from the district hospital. His red bristles were shaven off, and there remained only an unhealthy pale puffiness in the cheeks. (He had gorged himself on soup, I immediately realized.)

I was amazed at the red-headed student's knowledge. The surgeon sized up the triumphant "Fleming." Who are you, night orderly? Who? Who were you before prison?

"I'm a captain. A captain of the engineering troops. At the beginning of the war I was chief of the fortified area on Dicson Island. We had to put up fortifications in a hurry. In the fall of '41 when the morning fog broke we saw the German raider *Graf von Spee* in the bay. The raider shot up all our fortifications point-blank. And left. And I got ten years. 'If you don't believe it, take it for a fairy tale.'"

All the students studied through the night, passionately absorbing, soaking up knowledge with all the appetite of men condemned to death but suddenly given the chance of a reprieve.

After a meeting with the higher-ups, however, Fleming's spirits lifted and he brought a novel to the barrack where everyone else was studying.

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Finishing off some boiled fish, the remnants of someone else's feast, he carelessly leafed through the book.

Catching my ironic smile, Fleming said:

"What's the difference? We've been studying for three months now, and anyone who's lasted this long will finish and get his certificate. Why should I go crazy studying? You have to know how to look at things."

"No," I said. "I want to learn to treat people. I want to learn a real skill."

"Knowing how to live is a real skill."

It was then that I learned that Fleming's claim to have been a captain was only a mask, just another mask on that pale prison face. The rank of captain was real; the mask was the engineering troops. Fleming had been in the NKVD—the secret police—with the rank of captain. Information on his past had been accumulating drop by drop for several years. A drop was a measure of time, something like a water clock. This drop fell on the bare skull of a person being interrogated; such was the water clock of the Leningrad prisons of the thirties. Sand clocks measured the time allotted for exercise. Water clocks measured the time of confession, the period of investigation. Clocks of sand drained with fleeting speed; water clocks were tormentingly slow. Water clocks didn't count or measure minutes; they measured the human soul, the will, destroying it drop by drop, eroding it just as water erodes a rock. This piece of folklore about investigations was very popular in the thirties and even in the twenties.

Captain Fleming's words were gathered drop by drop, and the treasure turned out to be priceless. Fleming himself considered it priceless. It could not have been otherwise.

★★★

"Do you know the greatest secret of our time?"

"What?"

"The trials of the thirties. You know how they prepared them? I was in Leningrad at the time. I worked with Zakovsky. The preparation of the trials was all chemistry, medicine, pharmacology. They had more will-suppressants than you could shake a stick at. You don't think that if such suppressants exist, they wouldn't use them? The Geneva Agreement or something like that . . .

"It would have been too human to possess chemical will-suppressants and not use them on the 'internal front.' This and only this is the secret of the trials of the thirties, the open trials, open to foreign correspondents and to any Feuchtwanger. There were no 'doubles' in those trials. The secret of the trials was the secret of pharmacology . . ."

★★★

I lay on the short uncomfortable bunk in the empty student barrack which was shot through with rays of sunshine and listened to these admissions.

★★★

"There were experiments earlier—in the sabotage trials, for example. That comic trial of Ramzin touches on pharmacology very slightly."

★★★

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Fleming's story seeped through drop by drop, or was it his own blood that fell on my bare memory? What sort of drops were these—blood, tears, or ink? They weren't ink, and they weren't tears.

"Of course, there are instances when medicine is powerless. Or sometimes the solutions aren't prepared properly. There were rules to double check everything."

"Where are those doctors now?"

"Who knows? On the moon probably . . ."

★★★

"The investigator has all the latest scientific discoveries and technology in his arsenal, the latest in pharmacology."

★★★

"It wasn't cabinet 'A'—venene or poisonous—and not cabinet 'B'—strong effect . . ." It turns out that the Latin word "hero" is translated in Russian as "having a strong effect." And where were Captain Fleming's medications kept? In cabinet "C," the crime cabinet or in cabinet "M"—for magic?

A person who had access to cabinet "C," cabinet "M" and the most advanced scientific discoveries had to take a course for hospital orderlies to learn that man has one liver, that the liver is not a paired organ. He learned about blood circulation three hundred years after Harvey.

★★★

The secret was kept in laboratories, in underground offices, in stinking cages where the animals smelled like convicts in the Magadan transit prison in '38. In comparison with this transit prison Butyrki was a model of surgical immaculateness and smelled more like an operating room than an animal's cage.

All scientific and technological discoveries are checked first of all for any military significance, even to the extent of speculating on their possible future military uses. And only that which has been sifted through by the generals, and found to have no relevance to war, is given over for the common use.

Medicine, chemistry, pharmacology have long since been placed under military control. Throughout the world, institutes for the study of the brain have always accumulated the results of experiments, observations. Borgia's poisons were always a weapon of *Realpolitik*. The twentieth century brought with it an extraordinary tide of pharmacological and chemical preparations for the control of the psyche.

But if it is possible to obliterate fear with medicine, the opposite is true a thousand times—to suppress the human will by injections, by pure pharmacology and chemistry without making use of any "physical" methods such as breaking ribs and knocking out teeth, stubbing out cigarettes on the body of the person under investigation or trampling him with the heels of boots.

★★★

These two schools of investigation were known as physics and chemistry. The physicists regarded purely physical persuasion as the cornerstone of their building and viewed beatings as a means of revealing the moral foundations of the world. Once revealed, how base and worth-

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less were the depths of human essence! Beatings could achieve any testimony. Under the threat of a club, inventors made scientific discoveries, wrote verse and novels. The fear of beating and the stomach's scale for measuring its "ration" worked miracles.

Beating is a sufficiently weighty and effective psychological weapon.

Many useful results were produced by the famous and ubiquitous "conveyor" in which the investigators alternated without giving the arrested person a chance to sleep. After seventeen days without sleep a man loses his sanity. Has this scientific observation been made in the offices of political investigators?

But neither did the Chemical School retreat.

Physics could guarantee material for "Special Councils" and all sorts of "troikas" where a triumvirate of judges would make their decisions behind closed doors. The School of Physical Inducement, however, could not be applied in open trials. The School of Physical Inducement (I believe that's the term used by Stanislavsky) could not publicly present its theatre of blood, could not have prepared the "open trials" that made all mankind tremble. The preparation of such spectacles was within the realm of competency of the chemists.

★★★

Twenty years after that conversation I include in this story lines taken from a newspaper article:

"Through the application of certain psychopharmacological agents it is possible, for example, to remove a human being's sense of fear for a limited time. Of particular importance is the fact that the clarity of his consciousness is not in the least disturbed in the process."

"Later even more unexpected facts came to light. Persons whose 'B phases' of dream were suppressed for a long period of time—in the given instance for seventeen nights in a row—began to experience various disturbances in their psychic condition and conduct."

What is this? Fragments of testimony of some former NKVD officer during the trial of the judges . . . A letter from Vyshinsky or Riumin before their deaths? No, these are paragraphs taken from a scientific article written by a member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. But all this—and a hundred times more—was learned, tried and applied in the thirties in the preparation of the "open trials"!

Pharmacology was not the only weapon in the investigator's arsenal of those years. Fleming mentioned a name that I knew well.

Ornaldo!

Of course! Ornaldo was a famous hypnotist who appeared frequently in the twenties in Moscow circuses, and not only in Moscow.

Ornaldo's speciality was mass hypnosis. Books on hypnosis are illustrated with photographs of his famous tours. "Ornaldo," of course, was a pseudonym. His real name was M. A. Smirnov, and he was a Moscow doctor. There were posters pasted all the way around special drums used for theatrical advertisements. Paolo-Svishev had a photograph hanging in the window on Stoleshnikov Lane. It was an enormous photograph of human eyes with the inscription "The Eyes of Ornaldo." Even now I remember those eyes and the emotional confusion that I experienced whenever I heard or saw Ornaldo's circus act. There are

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photographs of Ornaldo's performances taken in 1929 in Baku. Then he left the stage.

"Beginning in the middle of the thirties Ornaldo was in the secret employment of the NKVD."

The shiver of a revealed secret ran down my back.

Fleming would frequently and for no special reason praise Leningrad. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that he admitted he wasn't a native Leningrader. In fact, he had been recruited from the provinces by the aesthetes of the NKVD in the twenties as their worthy replacement. They grafted onto him tastes much broader than those provided by an ordinary school education. Not just Turgenev and Nekrasov, but Balmont and Sologub, not just Pushkin, but Gumilev as well:

"'And you, watchdogs of the king, pirates guarding gold in the dark port . . .' I'm not quoting the line incorrectly am I?"

"No, that's right."

"I can't remember the rest. Am I a watchdog of the king? Of the state?"

And smiling—both to himself and his past—he told with reverence how he had touched the file of the executed poet Gumilev, calling it the affair of lycée pupils. It was as if a Pushkinist were telling how he had held the goose quill pen with which Pushkin wrote *Poltava*. It was just as if he had touched the Stone of Kaaba, such was the bliss, the purification in every feature of his face. I couldn't help but think that this too was a way of being introduced to poetry, an amazing, extremely rare manner of introduction in the office of the criminal investigator. Of course the moral values of poetry are not transmitted in the process.

"When reading books I would first of all turn to the notes, the comments. Man is a creature of notes and comments."

"How about the text?"

"Not always. There is always time for that."

Obscene as this may sound, Fleming and his co-workers could partake of culture only in their work as investigators. Their familiarity with persons of literary and social circles was distorted but nevertheless real and genuine in a sense, not concealed behind a thousand masks.

Thus the chief informer on the artistic intelligentsia of those years was Major General Ignatiev. To hear the name of this former tsarist diplomat and well-known memoirist was surprising only at first. A steady, thoughtful, and qualified author of all sorts of "memoranda" and surveys of writers' lives; he had served fifty years in the ranks. Forty of those years were spent in the Soviet spy network.

"I'd already read the book, *Fifty Years in the Ranks*, and was familiar with his surveys when they introduced me to him. Or him to me," Fleming mentioned thoughtfully. "Not a bad book, *Fifty Years in the Ranks*."

Fleming didn't care much for newspapers, news or radio programmes. International events interested him little. His emotional life was dominated by a deep resentment for that dark power that had promised the high-school boy he would fathom boundless depths, that had carried him to such heights and that had now shamelessly cast him into the abyss without leaving a trace.

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Fleming's introduction to culture was peculiar—some sort of brief courses and some excursions to the Hermitage. The boy grew into an investigator-aesthete who was shocked by the crude force that was rushing into the "organs of justice" in the thirties. His type was swept away and destroyed by the "new wave" that placed its faith in crude force and despised not only psychological refinements, but even the "conveyor" and the method of not allowing the prisoner to sit down until he confessed. The new wave simply had no patience for any scientific calculations or lofty psychology. It turned out easier to get results with simple beatings. The slow aesthetes ended up on the moon. Fleming remained alive by quirk. The new wave couldn't wait.

The hungry gleam in Fleming's eyes faded, and professional observativeness again made its voice heard.

"You know, I was watching you during the conference. You had something on your mind."

"I just want to remember everything, remember it and describe it."

Some images swayed in Fleming's already relaxed and calmed brain.

★★★

In the psychological ward where Fleming worked there was an enormous Latvian. Every time the giant sat down to eat, Fleming would sit opposite him, unable to restrain his ecstacy at the sight of such a mountain of food.

Fleming never parted with his pot, the same pot with which he had arrived from the north . . . It was a talisman, a Kolyma talisman.

The criminal element in the psychological ward caught a cat, killed it, cooked it, and gave Fleming a piece as the traditional Kolyma bribe since he was the orderly on duty. Fleming ate the meat and kept silent about the cat. The cat was a pet in the surgical ward.

The students were afraid of Fleming. But whom didn't the students fear? In the hospital Fleming was already working as an orderly, a staff medic. Everyone feared and hated him, sensing in him not only an employee of the secret police but also the master of some unusually important, terrible secret.

The antipathy grew, and the plot thickened after a sudden trip on Fleming's part to meet with a young Spanish woman. She was a real Spaniard, the daughter of one of the members of the government of the Republic of Spain. She'd been a spy, got involved in a web of provocations, was sentenced and cast out onto Kolyma to die. It transpired, however, that Fleming was not forgotten by his old and distant friends, his former colleagues. He had to learn something from the woman, to confirm something. But the patient couldn't wait. She had recovered and was being sent to a woman's mine. Interrupting his work in the hospital, Fleming suddenly travelled to a meeting with the woman, spent two days on the seven-hundred kilometre road with its incessant flow of vehicles and a checkpoint every kilometre. Fleming was lucky, and he returned from the meeting safe and sound. The event could have appeared taken from a novel, a feat of camp love. Alas, Fleming didn't travel or accomplish any feats for the sake of love. His was a passion much stronger than love, the highest passion of all, and it would carry Fleming safely past all the camp checkpoints.

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Fleming frequently recalled the thirties and the sudden flood of murders and suicides. There was the death of the family of Savinkov, the former revolutionary and terrorist. The son was shot, and the family —the wife, two children and the wife's mother—did not wish to leave Leningrad. All left letters for each other before killing themselves, and Fleming's memory preserved lines of a note from one of the children: " Grandma, we're going to die soon . . ."

★★★

The sentence Fleming had received in connexion with the " NKVD Affair " ended in 1950, but he didn't return to Leningrad. He didn't receive permission. His wife who had retained their room all those years came to Magadan from Leningrad, wasn't able to make any living arrangements and went back. Fleming returned to Leningrad just before the Twentieth Party Congress, to the same room he'd lived in before his disaster . . .

He had to do a lot of running around to get his pension of 1,400 old-style rubles that he had coming to him for his years of service. His camp medical courses notwithstanding, he was not allowed to return to his old " speciality " as an expert on pharmacology. It turned out that all the " former employees," all the veterans of these affairs, all the aesthetes who were still alive had long since been put out to pasture—all of them, right down to the last courier.

Fleming got a job as a book selector in a secondhand bookstore on Liteiny Prospect. Although his relationship and contact with the Russian intelligentsia was such a peculiar one, he considered himself to be of one bone and one flesh with it. To the end he refused to separate his fate from that of the Russian intelligentsia, feeling perhaps, that only contact with books could help him preserve his skills, if only he succeeded in living till better times.

In the nineteenth century a captain in the " engineering troops " would have taken vows and retreated to a monastery, as did the Russian writer Konstantin Leontiev. But the dangerous and lofty world of books was tinted with fanaticism for Fleming, and like any other infatuation with books, it served the function of a moral purge. The former admirer of Gumilev and expert on both Gumilev's fate and his comments on verse could not become a night watchman. Perhaps use his new profession of hospital orderly? No, better to be a used-book dealer.

"I'm constantly running around, filling out forms. Bring us some rum."

" I don't drink."

" How unfortunate, how inconvenient it is that you don't drink. Katya, he doesn't drink! You understand? I'm constantly working at it. I'll return to my old job."

" If you go back," Katya said with her blue lips, " I'll hang myself or drown myself the very next day! "

" I'm just kidding. I'm always kidding . . . I'm constantly presenting applications, running around the courts, travelling to Moscow. After all, they took me back in the Party. But you know how? "

A wad of rumpled paper emerged from Fleming's jacket pocket.

" Read this. This is Drabkina's testimony. She was a prisoner in my

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camp in Igarka. Later she published her memoirs under the title *Black Toast*. Quickly I read through the woman's extensive testimony:

" As head of the camp he treated the prisoners well and for this reason was soon arrested and convicted . . ."

I leafed through the dirty, sticky testimony of Drabkina which had passed through the careless fingers of government officials . . .

Bending down to my ear, his breath reeking of rum, Fleming explained hoarsely that he had been a " human being " in camp, even Drabkina confirms that.

" Do you really need all this? "

" I need it. It fills my life. Who knows, maybe I'll pull it off. How about a drink? "

" I don't drink."

" For years of service. But that's not what I need . . ."

" Stop it, or I'll hang myself," Katya shouted.

" She's got a heart condition," Fleming explained.

" Take yourself in hand. Write. You have a good style. I know that from your letters. And a story or a novel is, after all, a confidential letter."

" No, I'm not a writer. I'm going to keep on working at what I started . . ."

And slobbering in my ear, he whispered something I could make neither head nor tail of, that supposedly there never was any Kolyma and that he himself had spent seventeen days on the " conveyor " in '37 and that his mind was not what it used to be.

" They're publishing a lot of memoirs now. For example, they just published Yakubovich's *In the World of Outcasts*, his memoirs about his years in a tsarist penal farm. Let them publish that stuff."

" Have you written any memoirs? "

" No, but there is a book I want to recommend for publication. You know which one? I went to the Lenin Publishing House, but they told me to mind my own business . . ."

" What book? "

" The notes of Sanson, the Paris executioner. Now those are memoirs! "

" The Parisian executioner? "

" Yes. Sanson guillotined Charlotte Corday and slapped her cheeks, and the cheeks of the severed head blushed. One other thing: they used to give parties that they called ' The Victims' Ball.' Do we have that kind of ball? "

" The Victim's Ball had nothing to do with the Thermidor Period; it was part of the Post-Thermidor Period. Sanson's notes are a forgery."

" What's the difference if they're a forgery or not? Either there was such a book or there wasn't. Let's have some rum. I've tried a lot of drinks in my time, but there's nothing like rum. Rum. Jamaican rum."

Fleming's wife prepared dinner—mountains of greasy food that was almost instantly devoured by the voracious Fleming. An insatiable gluttony remained forever a part of Fleming, just as thousands of other former convicts retained their psychic traumas for the rest of their lives.

The conversation somehow broke off in the early city twilight; I could

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hear next to me the familiar Kolyma champing and slurping. I thought of life's strength—hidden in a healthy stomach and bowels that were capable of consuming in large quantities. That had been Fleming's defensive reflex on Kolyma—an omnivorous greed. A lack of spiritual fastidiousness acquired behind the desk of a political investigator had also served to prepare him and cushion the shock of his Kolyma fall. As he fell, he perceived no abyss, for he had known all this even earlier and the knowledge saved him by weakening his moral torments, if such torments had even existed. Fleming experienced no additional spiritual traumas; he witnessed the worst and indifferently watched those next to him perish. Prepared to struggle only for his own life, he saved that life, but in his soul there remained a dark footprint that had to be obliterated, purged with penitence. His penitence was a slip of the tongue, a half-hint, a conversation aloud with himself—without regret or condemnation. "The cards just didn't fall my way." Nevertheless Fleming's story was an act of penitence.

★★★

"You see this?"

"Your Party membership card?"

"Right. It's brand new! But it wasn't simple, not at all simple. Six months ago the District Party Committee examined the question of taking me back into the Party. They all sat around, read the materials. The Secretary of the Committee, a Chuvash, announced the decision in a flat sort of way, almost rudely:

"'Well, it's a clear situation. Write up a resolution: Reinstatement with an interruption in membership.'

"It was as if they threw hot coals on me: 'with an interruption in membership.' My first thought was that if I didn't immediately declare I was in disagreement with the resolution, they'd always ask afterwards why I was silent when my case was being examined. I mean, that's why you're called in, so you can speak your piece in time, tell them . . . I raised my hand.

"'What'ya want?' That same dead rude fashion.

"I said: 'I disagree with the resolution. I won't be able to get a job anywhere without being asked to explain the interruption.'

"'You're a quick one,' the First Secretary of the Party District Committee said. 'You're so pushy because you're not hurting for money. How much is your pension?'

"He was right, but I interrupted him and said that I asked for total reinstatement with no interruption in membership.

"And he said: 'What are you pushing for and getting all worked up? You're in blood up to your elbows!'

"There was a roaring in my head. 'How about you,' I said, 'Aren't your hands in blood?'

"The First Secretary said: 'This meeting is cancelled.'

"'And back then, in '37,' I said, 'didn't you bloody your hands then?'

"The First Secretary said: 'Enough of this running off at the mouth. We can vote again. Get out of here.'

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"I went out into the corridor and they brought me the resolution: 'Reinstatement in the Party denied.'

"I ran around Moscow like a crazy man, filling out forms, writing letters. The resolution was cancelled. But the original formulation stayed: 'Reinstatement with interruption of membership.'

"The person who reported my situation at the Party Control Commission said I should have kept my mouth shut at the District Committee Meeting. I'm still working at it, filling out forms, going to Moscow, filing legal suits. Have a drink."

"I don't drink."

"This isn't rum, it's cognac. Five-star cognac! For you."

"Take the bottle away."

"I'll do just that, carry it away, take it with me. You won't be offended?"

"Not in the least."

A year passed and I received a last letter from the used-book dealer: "My wife died suddenly while I was away from Leningrad. I arrived six months later and saw her grave and a snapshot of her in the coffin. Don't condemn me for my weakness; I have all my wits about me, but I can't get anything done. I live as if in a dream and have lost all interest in life. I know this will pass, but I need time. What did she see in her life? Dragged herself from one prison to another with packages and legal certificates. Social contempt, the trip to be with me in Magadan, a life of poverty and now this—the end. Forgive me, I'll write more later. Yes, I'm in good health, but is the society I live in healthy? All the best."

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